



**Interview with Dimitra-Dora Teloni, Greek social worker, academic and activist**

**“Struggling for social justice is not something that you achieve in one day. You have to be there and be patient, take care of yourself and take care of your comrades, and be together and act collectively”.**

In this issue we have discussed the meaning of critical social work from diverse perspectives. In our section of interviews, we are glad to present a conversation with Dimitra-Dora Teloni<sup>1</sup>. She is an Assistant Professor in the Social Work Department at the University of West Attica, Athens, Greece. She is a social worker and activist and participates in the solidarity movement during the financial crisis as well as in the antiracist movement in Greece. She has been a member of the Social Work Action Network in the United Kingdom since 2004 and is a founder member of the Greek Social Work Action Network.

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**Gianinna:** Dear Dora, thank you very much for giving this interview to our Journal Critical Proposals in Social Work. I am glad to have this conversation with you today because the aim of our journal is to promote debates on critical social work from a cosmopolitan perspective, including diverse approaches and experiences on what it means to build critical approaches in our profession and discipline nowadays. In Chile and in Latin America in general, we don't know much about Greek social work though, I think, we have many things in common (for example, the experience of dictatorship and its impacts on social work). One of the main problems is that in our countries few people speak and read English, so we have a language barrier that contributes to an “isolated” development of social work debates, and also inhibits the contributions that Latin American social workers can make in other latitudes and vice versa. That's the idea of our journal, and that is why we created a bilingual journal, with the purpose of translating – in the broad sense of the idea of translation – and connecting debates from critical perspectives around the world

**Dimitra-Dora:** It is an honour for me, thank you very much for considering me. This is very interesting, to be honest, I think in Greece we don't know about Chile, but I have also the feeling that we have many things in common. However, I suspect that you are

<sup>1</sup> Online interview conducted on October 9, 2020.

more progressive than official social work in Greece. I heard that in your university you do marvellous work. I think we have a lot to teach each other, to exchange.

**Gianinna:** Thank you very much Dora. We would like to know more about you, about your trajectory as a social worker, your experiences and views about social work in these critical times and the possibility of resistance to neoliberalism today.

The first question is about you, your trajectory and career as a social worker.

**Dimitra-Dora:** As you know, most young people take exams, usually in the universities in Greece, when they are eighteen years old. I didn't follow this trajectory. I took these exams when I was twenty-eight years old. I studied social work about thirty. After that, I was working with drug addiction, young people and their families, and I was also working in communities for the prevention of addictions. After that I decided to study social work. I studied four years in a public university in Patras; in the town where I was born. I studied until I was thirty-two years old. Then I worked with women with breast cancer. But this was not enough, and I wanted to study more so I went abroad to the University of Liverpool where I did my Masters. My Masters Degree was in Research Methodology (Social Policy and Sociology). And then I wanted to do a PhD, but I didn't have much money, so I had to come back to Greece to work and pay the fees for the PhD. I finished my PhD and continued to work with people with cancer. And then I started to teach from 2006 until today in the Social Work Department in Patras, and then in the Social Work Department at the University of West Attica in Athens. I have taught for the last fourteen years, but also during all these years I was very involved in politics, in unions and in social movements in Greece. That's my story more or less.

**Gianinna:** How was the experience of studying your PhD in England?

**Dimitra-Dora:** Actually, I did my research in Greece. It was about frontline social workers in municipalities and public social services, covering issues of poverty, social services and social work. My supervisor was Chris Jones, he is very famous in radical social work. And also, at the University of Liverpool I met Michael Lavalette, you know Michael. I was also there in 2004, when the Social Work Action Network - SWAN had its first conference. It was a unique experience to be there and to be part of this. And I also met Ian Ferguson who you know and studied at the same University as Vasilios Ioakimidis.

The University of Liverpool was an opportunity for me to know more about radical and critical social work, particularly about radical social work, because in Greece we had

never been taught about radical perspectives before. I started to be closer to those approaches.

**Gianinna:** When I studied my PhD -I also studied it in England, but between 2010 and 2014- I did my thesis underpinned by critical and radical social work as well, so Michael Lavalette, Ian Ferguson and Vasilios were part of my list of references. And I remember, at that time I found a paper about austerity, dismantling of welfare in Greece and how social workers resisted the call from the government, which was very important for my research. The paper was written by you and colleagues and was an inspirational paper because you analysed the way in which social workers, as a collective body, had contested the government policies by doing acts of civil disobedience.

**Dimitra-Dora:** At that time there were many austerity policies in Greece that left people in extreme poverty, because the financial crisis was the opportunity to promote neoliberal policies and cuts in public welfare, in public health and social services. They tried to promote privatisation in all the sectors. From 2011 until 2015 there were great social movements. There was the Solidarity Movement, which was very important because what they did...we did...because many of the members of the movement were social workers. And what was the interesting thing in the Solidarity Movement? As many people didn't have access to the public health system, we, from the Solidarity Movement, created a grassroots health sector. We created what we called medical centres. We organised across Greece and provided primary health care for free. This was because the right-wing government at that time decided that people in order to have primary health care, had to pay. And people during that period, because there was a lot of poverty, didn't have money to pay for health, and didn't have money to buy their medicines. So, what the Solidarity Movement did was to create these medical centres in which doctors, nurses and social workers, and other people participated. All this was made without any funding at all. No funding from the government and we weren't an NGO. We were a grassroots welfare initiative and had about 85 medical centres across the country. We created these centres and provided primary health care, but the Solidarity Movement did not do only that. At the same time, we struggled and demanded public health care. In 2015 the newly elected government of Syriza decided to provide free primary health care. This political shift was not only due to the fact that it is a left party but also due to the struggles and pressure by the solidarity movement and medical centres. This is an example of victory.

**Gianinna:** Yes, that is a great example of how social movements can position the demands of the people and defend their rights. The risk of course was to transform the movement into a new NGO...that is the risk if solidarity movements meet the people's



needs, the State withdraw...that is a great conquest that you could exert pressure to the point that the new elected government decided to provide free health care...

**Dimitra-Dora:** Yes, we were aware of this, and you know, the people who were participating, we also participated in other organisations and unions, so we knew how the system works and we didn't want to replace the state, and we didn't want to be an NGO. We were there because there was a crisis situation and people were starving, without access to health care. But at the same time, we were aware that the only solution was to have a public health system. And we wanted a strong public health system. Many of the members of the medical centres were also doctors, nurses and social workers who also worked in public hospitals. Half of the day they were in the hospitals. And after that, they were at the medical centres to provide healthcare for free. And they were also the connections, the links, between the movement and the public health system.

I think there are two points from which we can take lessons for social work. First, is that this was a grassroots initiative. It was not from above, it was from below. And in these centres participated also people from the community. They could be there, say for a while, discuss with other people, discuss with the social worker but not in a formal way. And also, as a second point: In a study that we held in 2015 we found that social workers who participated in these grassroots health initiatives, they gradually changed the way that they worked in the official services. For example, in contradiction with official social and health services the access in medical clinics was free for everyone: refugees, migrants, Greeks, Roma with no justificatory document. So, while official social work was bureaucratic, with gatekeepers and controllers, in the work with the grassroots initiatives social workers shifted their role to a more emancipatory one. And this was a big difference with official social work but at the same time also one of the strengths of the coalition of social work with the movements.

Another finding of this research was the fact that social workers adopted in official social services alternative ways of working with people, exactly those that they used with other health professionals in medical clinics. They also started to think about other ways in which social work can be closer to the people, more creative in their daily practice, and not so bureaucratic and oppressive as before.

What we saw in this case but also in the case of social work activity within the antiracist movement was that this connection between social work and the movement had many privileges. Social work has the knowledge on how to approach people in the community and how to support and respect people, and we do that very well. For example, when I participated in the medical centre as a social worker, when I was there with doctors and nurses, I could teach them how to treat people, making them understand that people have suffered abuse, or had other social problems so they have to be treated with care,

etcetera. In some way, I taught them how to respect people. And they also taught me different ways to work together and work more politically. I think the connection of social work and the movement and the grassroots initiatives is very important because we have many things to exchange.

This is just an example of the Solidarity Movement, because we had many other solidarity initiatives. For example, we had public meals, because people were starving during the years of austerity, they didn't have food, so we were in the squares and cooked all together in order to provide meals. There are many examples. There were about 300 welfare initiatives across Greece with no funding by the state or sponsors; the majority of them were created by the people for the people: for example, structures that provided lessons for children for free, food for people for free, medical care for free, social work for free.

At the same time, we had a very strong anti-racist movement in Greece, from the 1990s, but during that period in 2015 we had also a refugee crisis. We had a double crisis: a financial crisis and a refugee crisis. The anti-racist movement was very supporting and expressed solidarity for one million refugees that were in Greece in 2015.

**Gianinna:** That's something that I also want to ask you, about the anti-racist movement. I know that a few days ago something very important happened. The court had the decision against the fascist organisation Golden Dawn. I know that you and colleagues from Greece have participated in many demonstrations on this matter.

**Dimitra-Dora:** I am very happy, I participated in that huge demonstration on Monday with SWAN- Greece. It was a unique experience. So many people, there were more than 20,000 people there, with masks and all the safety measures. It was an historical moment not only for Greece but for Europe and for anti-fascist and anti-racist movements across the world. The Court decided that Golden Dawn is a criminal organisation. In 2013 Golden Dawn was a party that was elected in the parliament, so it was legal. Now it is illegal, and it is destroyed.

This has been a long way. We must be aware of that. Struggling for social justice is not something that you achieve in one day, in one month, in one year. You have to do that for years, and you have to be there and be patient and take care of yourself, take care of your comrades, take care of your colleagues, and be together and act collectively, because it takes a long time to achieve.

And why am I saying that? I am saying that because this case was in the Court for the last five and a half years. After the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, a Greek anti-fascist singer, a young man, who was murdered by Golden Dawn, his mother and anti-fascist and anti-racist movements accused Golden Dawn of this. And for the last five and a half



years they were trying to have this decision from the Court. But anti-fascist and anti-racist movements have struggled with Golden Dawn for the last twenty years. Fascism is not new here.

You see, it took many years. And many people, even the right-wing government says OK, we are anti-fascist, we fight against fascism, but these were lies. The system wants to have fascism and fascist organisations as Golden Dawn because they use them, as they are very useful to reinforce capitalism. To put it differently, fascism is an integral part of capitalism.

This is why we are very happy, because the decision of the Court arrived after many years of struggles, after many deaths, especially of immigrants. Because nobody speaks about the deaths of immigrants and refugees by the fascist. And this is very sad.

**Gianinna:** The cost in terms of human lives has been very high. There is a happy ending, but the process was heart-breaking. In Chile we also had our struggles and many people lost their lives because of police repression against the movements pushing for a change to the political Constitution created during the dictatorship of Pinochet in the 1980s.

What you have shared about social workers participating in the Solidarity Movement and anti-racist movements is very important for thinking about critical and radical social work nowadays; it talks about activism as a part of social work. During recent decades, at least in my experience as a student many years ago, social work and activism were dissociated. Activism was understood in some circles as a kind of action without foundations, as something that had nothing to do with professional social work or academic social work. You have shown in your experience that activism is strongly based on critical and radical social work theory, and when you talked about the research you conducted with social workers participating in the solidarity movement we can also learn that practice and research feed each other and that social work can be committed with an activism and knowledge basis.

**Dimitra-Dora:** I lived the same for years. I am now permanent staff at the university only in the last three years. All the previous years I wasn't permanent staff. Every six months I had to prepare new applications, new lectures, and I wasn't sure if I would have the job. Of course, I had all the qualifications. But I was also from the left and a member of the union. And it wasn't a good thing. I remember when I first started to teach in 2006 and brought these ideas of radical social work -for the first time, because before that, we didn't have that approach- it was amazing. I saw something in the eyes of my students and also of my colleagues...they told me "what are you talking about? What are these things you say to the students about refugees, about LGTBQ, about



social movements? This is not social work”. Also, my students were shocked. I still remember their expressions at the beginning.

I also have to tell you that it was not easy at all. It may now sound very nice, because at undergraduate level we teach radical and critical social work for the first time in Greece. This has also been another long struggle for years. I knew it was going to be hard, that was also why I was a member of the union. I faced many problems in my job, some people frighten me “don’t do that, because you are not going to have a job next year”. It was not straightforward that one day, suddenly, radical and critical approaches started to be taught in Greek social work.

We needed to bring these ideas slowly, we needed to do research about this, publications and conferences. For many years I was only invited to conferences abroad and not in Greece. For many years I couldn’t publish a paper in a Greek journal. Actually, one of my articles was rejected because it was underpinned by radical social work. It is a bit funny, but I am trying to tell you how the situation was. But gradually things changed not only in teaching but also in theory and in the street. We created the Social Work Action Network in Greece which promoted radical and critical social work. Our activity was on many levels such as participating in campaigns, announcements in our blog but also our activity included community action from a radical perspective. Therefore, we acted for three years in one of the poorest communities in Patras (one of the biggest cities in Greece) and struggled with the inhabitants for their social rights such as housing, community and childcare and many more. To put it differently we attempted to bring radical community development and community action in day-to-day practice. Given the rise of racism and the hostile policies against refugees in Greece and Europe, we also acted in coalition with the antiracist movement. Consequently, radical social work was more and more popular in Greece given that we acted on two levels. As academics but also as activists. Now in the University I teach radical and critical social work but also another module which is called “Human rights social work and the movements”. In this module users and representatives of the social movements participate and this not only fulfils the global standards of social work education but at the same time we achieve bringing together social work students, users and activists. So, I try to think and do things out of the box. I think this is very important for radical social work in general. We need to be creative and think out of the box.

And well, we also have humour and sarcasm to survive in capitalism. I don’t know how you can translate this (laughs).

**Gianinna:** It is a type of resistance, being sarcastic and using humour as a way of challenging and contesting dominant discourses.

**Dimitra-Dora:** Yes, absolutely. Well, things have gradually changed but still there are a lot of things to do.

**Gianinna:** To conclude, and considering we are in a critical time —the pandemic, shock doctrine, the dismantling of welfare, and in Latin America particularly, the regression of social protection systems, and so on— and also that we face, as social workers, a process of deprofessionalisation, what would be your message for social workers around the world? What is your view about these critical moments we are living in as citizens and as social workers?

**Dimitra-Dora:** It is a very complex period because we feel very isolated because of COVID-19 and at the same time we have to face a lot of difficulties in our families, in our jobs and maybe in our health, and this is also used by capitalism to attack the rights of the people. I think the first thing is our analysis about what is happening outside and not being isolated. I mean there are many ways to not be isolated. I survived through the financial crises and desperation generated by financial crisis, because of the collective action and because of solidarity. Because I knew that if I lost my job, there were people that would help me. I knew that if I was threatened in my job there was the union that would help me. I knew that I had comrades and colleagues to share ideas and act together. My message is not being isolated. Not being competitive. Not being individualistic in our jobs and try to find things to do with others. Take care of our comrades and think and act together, through campaigns. I think it is very important to find collective spaces to share ideas and act together. We cannot resist alone. Of course, it is important to have an individual resistance. But we need each other, and we need to find ways. I think, in SWAN- International, you know, we tried, and we succeeded in finding ways in these difficult times not only to share but also to provide to other people and, by this, to have this connection for social change.

**Gianinna:** Individual resistance is important of course because we need to cope as we can with barriers every day, but it is not enough. Individual resistance is overwhelming at the end. We need a network to work together, in collective ways of resistance. But it is difficult not being competitive and individualistic in our jobs; individual competition is always on the table because policy guidelines are promoting those values. The challenges are related to how we put in practice counterhegemonic values in human relations on a daily basis.

**Dimitra-Dora:** I totally agree. I always ask... Am I alienated? Please, tell me, because I think about work all the time. Alienation is also on the table for all of us. It is not something that happens to other people if we are Marxist and so on. It is here day by day. And I think that the best mirror for us is not only to be honest with ourselves but to



be honest with other people about us. I hope people around me can say ‘yes, you are alienated, come back’. Yes, capitalism and values of competition and individualism, is not only for the others, it is also about us.

**Gianinna:** Yes, that’s an idea that I like because it is not binary. It is not like ‘on the one side you have those neoliberal people and on the other side you have us, those who resist neoliberalism”, because we are also part and crossed by neoliberal rationality. We also reproduce. If we don’t understand this, we finish believing that social workers can be superheroes. And I think we are far from that.

Thank you very much Dora for sharing your views with us.



## Find out more about Dimitra-Dora's work:

- Documentary film "Greece 2012: Social work in austerity" <https://vimeo.com/39398286>
- Teloni, D. D., Dedotsi, S. and Telonis, A. (2020). Refugee 'crisis' and social services in Greece: social workers' profile and working conditions. *European Journal of Social Work* 23 (6), pp 1005-1018. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2020.1772729
- Teloni, D.D. (2020). Social Work and COVID-19 in Greece. In Lavalette, M., Ioakimidis, V and Ferguson, I. (Eds.). *Social Work and the COVID-19 Pandemic* (pp. 87-95). Policy Press.
- Teloni, D.D. (2011). Grassroots community work for the 'unwanted': The case of Kinisi and the rights of refugees. In M. Lavalette, M. and Ioakimidis, V. (Eds.). *Social work in extremis: Lessons for Social Work Internationally*. (pp 65-79). Policy Press.
- Teloni, D.D. and Adam, S. (2016). Solidarity Clinics and Social Work in the Era of Crisis in Greece. *International Journal of Social Work* 61 (6), pp 794-808.
- Teloni, D.D. and Mantanika, R. (2015). This is a cage for migrants: The rise of racism and challenges for social work in Greek context. *Critical and Radical Social Work* 3(2), pp. 189-206.



The members of the Medical Clinic in Patras and Greek SWAN. We participate in the strike and demonstrate demanding free access to the primary health care system in 2014 during the period of austerity. Translation of the banner: "Do not despair: Resist – Act – Demand/ Medical Clinic Patras".